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## **The Death of Chad's Warrior President: What it Means for the Region and the World**

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A president who dies on the frontline of battle is something remarkable in the twenty-first century. Yet for Chadian President, Idriss Déby Itno, a military man, death on the battlefield exemplified the modus of his rule. Déby was killed on 20 April of this year while on a visit to his troops that were fighting a Chadian rebel movement that entered Chad from Libya. This was not the first time that a rebel movement entered Chadian territory from a neighboring state with the goal of toppling the Chadian regime. In fact, this is how Déby himself came to power. In 1990 Déby and his warriors invaded Chad from neighboring Sudan and, after a military coup d'état, Déby assumed the presidency of Chad. Déby created a repressive regime and ruled through corruption and the threat of violence.

On 19 April 2021, Déby was elected president for a sixth time after widely contested elections. His supporters were ready to cheer him on in the capital city N'Djaména, but the president did not appear for his victory speech. Instead, he was fighting yet another battle, some 300 km north of the capital. According to the Chadian army, Déby was injured in a bloody clash with FACT – a

rebel movement from the north of Chad that had been entrenched in Libya for several years.<sup>1</sup> Déby did not survive the trip to the hospital in N'Djaména. He died as he lived – a warrior.

This article views Déby's death on the battlefield as a symbolic end to his rule, inquires into the circumstances that prompted his visit to the battlefield, and explores the implications of Déby's death for Chad's future, for the region, and for relevant stakeholders.

## **A Warrior President**

Déby began his career in the military in the early 1970s, in the midst of the first Chadian civil war (1965-1979). He received military training in France and returned to Chad as a pilot. Under the presidency of Hissène Habré, Déby worked his way up in the Chadian army, and together with his brother and cousin, became a leader in the security apparatus of the state. In 1989, he and his relatives aroused Habré's suspicion, forcing him to flee for his life.<sup>2</sup> Déby fled to the western province of Sudan, Darfur, where many warriors from his tribe, the Zaghawa, joined him. Sudan under President Omar al-Bashir gave Déby the necessary military support to take over from Hissène Habré.

Déby managed to hold on to power for 31 years; a year longer than his Sudanese counterpart, deposed President Omar al-Bashir. During his presidency he repeatedly faced armed opposition and in 2006 and 2008 armed groups came close to deposing him. There are many factors that contributed to his survival. One of them was undoubtedly the military support Déby received from France and the financial support from other foreign benefactors.<sup>3</sup> Another was the way in which Déby managed relations with his tribe and with his inner circle. He ensured wealth and a position in power to his close relatives and, whenever possible, rebel leaders in exchange for their loyalty.

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<sup>1</sup> [“Deby’s Death and Chad’s Next Day: This Is What the Army Announced,”](#) *Al-Jazeera*, 20 April 2021 (accessed 26 April 2021).

<sup>2</sup> “Chad: The Victims of Hissène Habré Still Awaiting Justice,” *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 17, No. 10 (A), July 2005, 12.

<sup>3</sup> For military support from France, see for instance: Marielle Debos, [“Airstrikes and “Stability”: What’s the French Army Doing in Chad?”](#) *African Arguments*, 14 February 2019 (accessed 26 April 2021). For financial support from Sudan, see for instance: Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, *Darfur: A New History of a Long War* (Zed Books, London, 2008), 113. For financial support from the Gulf, see for instance: [“UAE Contributes \\$150m to Support Chad Development Plan,”](#) *The National News*, 8 September 2017 (accessed 26 April 2021).

Also, he cultivated an image of himself as a Zaghawa tribal leader and warrior chief to maintain a semblance of legitimacy.

In Zaghawa culture, the warrior chief is a position worthy of respect. During wartime, the quintessential warrior chief attempts to gain influence through the “patrimonial marketplace”<sup>4</sup> to gain wealth and power until he has no more need for his gun.<sup>5</sup> Déby did just that. When the survival of the Chadian regime was in danger in 2006, Déby sought to revitalize his image as a warrior chief. For example, Déby adopted an additional name – he took the name Itno, the name of his grandfather, a well-respected tribal leader. The name means “warrior,” and served as a public reminder that his legitimacy to rule derived from his tribal heritage and his bravery.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Déby cultivated this image of bravery by personally joining his troops in battle. Also in his death, Déby was an exemplar of a Zaghawa warrior chief.

### **The origins of the FACT rebel group**

The Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT) has its origins in the 2005-2010 proxy war between Chad and Sudan. During this proxy war Déby fought many battles to stay in power. When a bloody conflict broke out in 2003 in Darfur, Sudan, Déby could not stay on the side lines. His tribe, the Zaghawa, along with other marginalized "African" tribes in Darfur, began an insurgency against the government of Sudan. The Sudanese government armed "Arab" militias in Darfur who carried out massacres in the villages belonging to the insurgents and their tribesmen. The human catastrophe that followed was later declared a genocide by the United States. Déby's Zaghawa inner circle greatly pressured him to intervene in Darfur. After an unsuccessful balancing act between his tribe and his regional patron, Sudan, Déby finally began supporting the Darfuri insurgents in 2005.<sup>7</sup> By that time the Sudanese government had also begun lending support to

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<sup>4</sup> Ketil Fred Hansen, “A Democratic Dictator’s Success: How Chad’s President Deby Defeated the Military Opposition in Three Years (2008-2011),” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2013), 590–93.

<sup>5</sup> Marielle Debos, *Living by the Gun in Chad: Combatants, Impunity and State Formation* (Zed Books, London, 2016), 10–16.

<sup>6</sup> Eline Rosenhart, “Tribal Politics, Idriss Déby and the Darfur Conflict: Chad-Sudan Relations 2001-2012,” MA Thesis, Tel Aviv University, October 2019, 60-63.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 40-55.

Chadian rebel groups against Déby. This proxy war between Chad and Sudan continued until the two countries signed a peace treaty in 2010.

One of the groups that opposed Déby during the Chad-Sudan proxy war was the Union of Forces for Democracy and Development (UFDD). This group had links to the former regime of Hissène Habré. With the support of Sudan, the UFDD sought to seize power in Chad. In 2006 the group almost succeeded in capturing N'Djaména and in 2007 it tried again.<sup>8</sup> The Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT) is a product of the fragmentation of the UFDD. Currently, FACT is trying to take over N'Djaména.

FACT was founded by Mahamat Mahdi Ali in 2016 with the aim of ridding Chad of Déby. The group became involved in the civil war in Libya and recently concluded a non-aggression pact with the Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar. On the day of the Chadian elections in April 2021, FACT managed to penetrate Chadian territory.<sup>9</sup> Déby's forces launched an offensive against FACT, which became Déby's last battle. FACT leader Mahamat Mahdi Ali proclaimed in his press releases that he wants Chad to be democratic.<sup>10</sup> Given the fact that virtually all Chadian rebel leaders have made similar statements in the past and none of them took any concrete steps towards democracy, it seems unlikely that this is his true motive.

### **Does the future hold a democratic transition for Chad?**

Chadian civil society leaders alleged that developments in the aftermath of Déby's death have been 'undemocratic'. Mahamat Idriss Déby, Déby's son, was immediately appointed interim president. The military announced that Mahamat 'Kaka', as he is known, will lead Chad until democratic elections will take place in 18 months. This goes against the current Chadian constitution, which stipulates that the speaker of parliament is first in the presidential line of succession. Chadian civil

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<sup>8</sup> "[Les rebelles de l'Ufdd inquiètent N'Djaména](#)," *N'Djamena Bi-Hebdo*, 29 October 2006 (accessed 26 April 2021); Habibou Bangré, "[Tchad: Les rebelles de l'UFDD reprennent les attaques](#)," *Afrik*, 15 January 2007 (accessed 30 April 2021).

<sup>9</sup> "[Qui sont les rebelles du Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad?](#)" *DW*, 19 April 2021 (accessed 26 April 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Edward McAllister and David Lewis, "[Explainer: Who Are the Rebels Threatening to Take Chad's Capital?](#)" *Reuters*, 22 April 2021 (accessed 26 April 2021).

society leaders have called on the international community to help guide Chad into a democratic transition. The African Union called for an end to military dictatorship in Chad.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, civilian protests erupted in N'Djaména and the military cracked down violently on the protesters. Interim President Mahamat Idriss Déby tried to calm the sentiments of the people by guaranteeing a national dialogue.<sup>12</sup>

For now, it appears that FACT has temporarily withdrawn after facing heavy resistance from the Chadian military. But the possibility that FACT will return to N'Djaména is reasonable. After all, both Déby and his predecessor Habré, came to power in a similar fashion. Also, tensions between the new military council and the political opposition in the country could escalate. This could have major consequences for the stability of the country and the region.

Several international stakeholders have a major interest in the stability of the region. Europe, for instance, is focused on stemming the tide of refugees towards its coastal regions. Chad is a host country to nearly half a million refugees who fled from war in neighboring countries.<sup>13</sup> If the Chadian government were to lose its ability to provide basic security inside its borders, these refugees might attempt to make their way to the Mediterranean and then to Europe. France still holds major sway over its former colonies – Chad being one of them – and sees stability as one of its greatest interests in Africa. For the past 31 years, France has provided Déby with military and logistical support to stay in power. His sudden death is a shock to France. France has already expressed support for Mahamat Idriss Déby, although it called for a civilian national unity government after international criticism.<sup>14</sup> The United States also has a stake in Chad's future. Its main interest is in combatting violent extremist groups. If there were to be a vacuum of power in Chad, there is a danger that these groups might find a breeding ground there, as they found in Libya, Nigeria and Mali. Déby's passing could also strain the recent Israel-Chad peace treaty.

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<sup>11</sup> [“Chad after Idriss Déby: African Union Urges End to Military Rule,”](#) *BBC News*, 25 April 2021 (accessed 25 April 2021); [“Chad President's Death: Rivals Condemn 'Dynastic Coup',”](#) *BBC News*, 22 April 2021 (accessed 26 April 2021).

<sup>12</sup> [“Grief and Anger in Chad over Deadly Protest Crackdown,”](#) *Al-Jazeera*, 29 April 2021 (accessed 30 April 2021).

<sup>13</sup> [“Operational Portal Refugee Situation – Chad,”](#) *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, 31 March 2021 (accessed 25 April 2021).

<sup>14</sup> [“Why France is Backing Chad's New Leader: Mahamat Idriss Deby,”](#) *DW*, 23 April 2021 (accessed 26 April 2021).

The military take-over of the state and the crack-down on civilian protests in Chad share some similarities with the events that transpired in Sudan in 2019. In Sudan, through mediation from Ethiopia and the African Union, a transitional government composed of military and civilian components was set up until democratic elections can be held. Perhaps a similar transition is possible for Chad if the security situation permits. Déby's death could be an opportunity for a transition towards a more democratic and less oppressive form of rule. Perhaps it is time for Europe, the United States, Israel, and other international actors to break old patterns and support developing democratic processes in a country where the population has been oppressed by its leaders for decades.

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